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Voices from the Field:
Making Visible the Invisible:
The Role of Editing in Media Analysis and Language Arts

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Introduction

Editing is probably the most important ….*no, that's not right*. *Too boring for an opening*. *How about this*... In order to understand the role of editing in media analysis, we must …*nope, no good either. Let's see*. *Come on, you can do this*. In any media product, editing is like the thief wiping down his fingerprints before leaving the scene of the crime. *Better, but a little too harsh?* Analyzing media without understanding editing is a bit like analyzing a novel without understanding the alphabet. *Yeah, perfect!*

If all goes well with publication, the editors of this journal will have eliminated any sign of my struggle to write the opening line of the article, and only the last complete sentence in the paragraph above will appear in the final draft. The reader, then, is left with the impression of my easy eloquence and (hopefully) decides to continue reading the rest of the piece because they've concluded I may have something interesting to say. But how did you, the reader, come to this conclusion? And would you have felt the same if not for the editing? What if you'd seen how I struggled?

According to the core principles put forward by the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE), media literacy "requires active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create." Too often, we do not actively consider how specific media messages are constructed and for what purposes. There are creators behind the production of newspaper stories, music videos, movies, and yes, even articles in journals about media literacy. And the creators of these media products have points of view, values and purposes that might not be so apparent on the surface. So, one of the most important ways that we need to look at media products is to look closely at their construction and ask questions about how they have been edited in order to create particular effects.

Most media editing is benign, like the revising of my first paragraph or the cutting out of bloopers, but sometimes the addition of an interview of a particular celebrity or the insertion of a specific song can carry important messages intended to influence our consumer, political, and personal decision making. We have to be able to ask ourselves the following questions about any media product: why am I seeing this, what is included in what I am seeing, what is excluded, and what are the effects of these choices? It is unnecessary, according to the NAMLE Core Principles of Media Literacy Education, to ask IF a media product has a bias (trust me, it does), but the better question to consider is, "WHAT the substance, source, and significance of a bias might be."

Because it is considered a field of study and not a discipline, media literacy does not always seem to have a permanent home anywhere in the curriculum. Separate stand-alone media literacy courses are rare, and its key concepts tend to be spread throughout a variety of disciplines: Health, Social Studies, Language Arts, Video Production, Journalism, Fine Arts, and so on.

I am a high school English teacher, and in my career, I have found that the concept that "all media are constructed" and all of the NAMLE Core Principles infuse perfectly in everything I am expected to do with my Language Arts standards. Students use similar deconstruction strategies for taking apart a print advertisement as they do with a short story by Hawthorne. In fact, my main goals as an English teacher are to give my students the power to analyze critically a wide variety of types of text (print, visual, audio, digital, and others)

and to create texts that effectively communicate their points of view, which sounds a whole lot like what media literacy educators seek to do.

The classroom-tested activities that follow address these overlapping NAMLE Core Principles and Language Arts goals by making students aware of the effect of the often-invisible editing and construction that occurs. When they understand these effects, students can become active and critical consumers of the media messages that they too often receive only passively. They need the power not only to read and interpret the messages they receive, but to create their own as well, allowing them to participate fully in the 21st century culture that is being created and re-created at a dizzyingly clip.

Part One: Getting Started

Step One:

The first place I ask students to begin considering the role of editing is right in my own classroom. One of my favorite activities is to give a digital camera to one student and ask him or her to take pictures for the whole period. The student should take as many pictures as possible of me, other students, objects around the room, etc. At first, the other students and I are clearly posing for the camera, but after a few minutes and a hundred pictures, we all tend to forget about the photographer. Then, I take the hundreds of pictures the student took and I choose about 40 or 50, which I then put on our school's server or on a disc. See Fig. 1 for a sample of the kinds of pictures, but please keep in mind that these were a group of freshmen on a block period! Don't think too badly of me.

Figure 1: Student pictures for editing project

Step Two:

Next, I take my students to the computer lab. In pairs, they have to choose 15-20 pictures and arrange them in an order that presents some kind of feeling or point of view about me, their classmates, or education in general. Students then drop these selected photographs into a PowerPoint presentation, add some music, and present their short "films" to their classmates. For students to really understand the power of the editing they've done, they have to be able to explain how the choices they made create particular effects. Look at Fig. 2, for example. Notice that it is the selection, arrangement, and order of the pictures that creates the impression that I do not care about my students. (It's not true, really! It's the editing!)

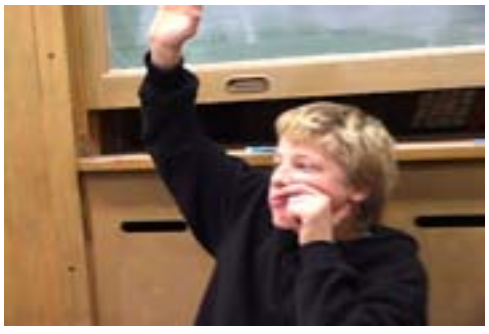
It is also important for students to have the opportunity to compare their versions with what their classmates created. Sometimes the exact same pictures from this exercise are used for completely different purposes, through which they learn the power of context and proximity. As students watch each other's presentations, it's essential that they can identify the point of view of each of the presentation and to explain how the editing choices created that point of view. For example, because one group is trying to show how their classmates are out of control, they chose only those pictures where kids were up out of their seats, pushing each other, and so on. Music can also be used to help create a point of view; Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall" with the line "We don't need no education" has been a popular choice for some groups.

I have taught in low-tech schools where overhead projectors are a luxury and where a computer lab with PowerPoint technology is a fantasy. One solution is to take the pictures the same way, print 20-30 on regular paper, and cut out the individual photographs. Then, distribute them to groups of students and have them arrange them in an order that demonstrates a specific point of view, theme, or tone. Next, have the groups move to other group's sequence to determine its point of view and then have them rearrange that sequence to create another perspective using the same photographs.

Step Three:

Once students have had the chance to become either high-tech or low-tech editors, I move them out of my own classroom – I'm tired of getting beaten up visually by now – and turn them loose on the rest of the staff and administration by asking them to consider their overall attitude about their school and education in general. I ask them for some words that immediately come to mind when you think about school. In every class, the lists are usually pretty consistent in their diversity of opinions: a waste of time, exciting, friendly, authoritative, and so on. Once the list is complete, I ask them to form groups with students who share a similar point of view. Next, I ask them to think about what pictures they would take of their school that would reflect the tone they have chosen. Some years (depending upon the current state of my relationship with my principal) I have actually sent them out with digital cam-

Figure 2: Student sample for editing



eras around the school to capture the images they want. But another low-tech solution is for them to sketch out the 8-10 pictures in storyboard fashion that they would like to take if they had the means to do so.

Whether your students are using actual photographs or sketches, they should glue or tape their pictures onto paper or poster board and arrange them in an order that reflects their perspective and/or tone about their school. Next, they need to give their arrangement to another group who tries to determine the point being made about school. Once they have successfully identified the theme or tone, the real fun begins as each group rearranges, deletes, and even adds pictures to another group's project in order to change the original project's perspective. The goal is to change as little as possible, while altering the message considerably. We have had great class discussions about what effect the insertion or deletion of a single shot can have on the audience. This is also a perfect opportunity to think about how music and song choice can affect the audience's reactions as we play around with different audio tracks for each project.

Reflection:

The result of all of these activities is that students begin to understand that all media are constructed and that they all have an embedded point of view. They learn this because they have seen it and been responsible for its creation. They learn very quickly that they are being extremely selective in the photographs they use and that the order and frequency of images really matters. Students know that they are not being neutral or objective: they have a point they want to make and they learn to use all of the resources available to them in order to communicate it to their audience. This awareness of means of production is a power: students who are aware of the ways that editing creates feelings and reactions can no longer be victims of this power used by others against them. Connecting the theme of the first Spiderman movie – "with great power comes great responsibility" – and NAMLE's Core Principals might seem difficult, but it's clear that these exercises also give students "the skills they need to take responsibility for their own media use." They learn – hopefully – that they should not unfairly portray their English teacher (or suffer the consequences!).

Part Two: Analyzing Editing Choices

Step One:

It is only at this point, once students have created and analyzed media products for their editing, that I help students to arrive at a formal definition of "editing," which we normally describe as the process of inserting, deleting, and arranging images, text and sound for specific and intended purposes. Since much of what I like to analyze with my students is the editing found in documentary films, I usually find it useful to introduce students to some of the terminology unique to documentary filmmaking: the visual track, the audio track, and the text track. In brief, the visual track is made up of what we see in the finished film, like the pictures of my classroom or the school described above or footage shot or acquired by the filmmaker; the audio track includes music as in the examples above, but also includes voices, sound effects, and narration; last, the text track consists of what we read in the final version of the film, which could include subtitles, identification, text as narration, and so on. By looking critically at these three tracks, paying close attention specifically to how they are edited together, students are able to easily discern the filmmaker's message.

Step Two:

I like to start by looking at short clips from a few films to help students practice their analytical skills. One of my favorites to use early on in this process is the widely available documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. While much of the film focuses on Al Gore's quest to perfect his Power Point on global warming, I like to have students examine the insert chapters about various parts of Gore's life: his son's accident, the 2000 election, growing up on the family farm, and so on. Since my students were in elementary school when Gore lost his bid for the presidency, the section on the 2000 election *(Chapter 13, 0:34:15-0:36:49)* is a good place for students to analyze a topic with which they have little background knowledge to influence their own opinions. The clip is only about 2 minutes long, so after we look at it two or three times, I ask my students to give me their impressions of Al Gore from this section; they say things like: brave, strong, good sport, noble, etc. I also ask them to give their opinions about the process in Florida and they tend to say things like: fiasco, stolen election, got it wrong, and so on. Once we have these impressions listed on the board, I ask students to choose one and try to determine how we might have gotten that

impression from the editing of the images we saw and the sound we heard in the clip. We watch the clip a few more times so that students can find the evidence of their interpretations. Look, for example, Fig. 3 which demonstrates evidence of Gore's steadfastness in the face of disappointment. If the clip had contained a text track, students would have been expected to gather that evidence as well. Whenever the time and technology allows, I love for students to use actual screen captures (and even audio captures) as I've done here with the visual track to illustrate their points. While the example below refers only to the dialogue and voice-over by Gore, remember that the audio track also includes music and sound effects.

Step Three:

A second way that I like to have students examine the effect of editing choices is to present them with a series of clips that all deal with the same topic. One recent topic with the most films is, unfortunately, the war in Iraq. There are a number of films that are widely available online, at video stores, Netflix and Amazon, including *Gunner Palace*, *Fahrenheit 911* and such Academy Award nominees as *Iraq in Fragments*, *No End in Sight*, *My Country, My Country*, *Taxi to the Dark Side*, and *Operation Homecoming*. Here are editing aspects of each clip to look for and some questions that you might want to consider asking your students. Please note that while many of these films are identified as "NR" for "not rated," there may be concerns with strong language and graphic images, so you will want to be sure to preview each clip and make a determination of its use based upon your students and community.

My Country, My Country
(directed by Laura Poitras, 2006)
Chapter 6: 0:39:08-0:42:53

This section begins with the main subject of the film, Dr. Riyadh, a moderate Sunni running in the contentious 2005 elections after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, meeting with a potential supporter on the quiet streets of Adhamiya, a Baghdad neighborhood. The two men discuss the benefits of moderation in the face of extremism. Dr. Riyadh comes across as thoughtful, passionate, and levelheaded, and the calm on the streets seems to support his views. As a bridge to the next scene, the filmmaker cuts to U.S. soldiers in tanks patrolling, an army official distributing thousands of U.S. dollars to an Iraqi, and a soldier in a helicopter wearing a mock "panic button" on his helmet. The next scene is a briefing of very young-looking American soldiers who are warned of the growing anti-Americanism of the area. Though the chapter is called "Bad Things Can Happen," it ends with the briefer, who had just broken down briefly talking about the loss of two Iraqi colleagues, telling the soldiers, almost trying to convince himself, "it's not all bad, it's not all bad."

Questions to consider:

1. What point is the filmmaker trying to make by including the shots inserted between Dr. Riyadh and the briefing of the soldiers? What is in common among those shots?
2. Filmmakers often try to make their points through contrast. What is contrasted in this scene and for what purpose? How is this contrast drawn through the editing choices of the director?
3. When you think back on this clip, what are the most memorable sequences of the visual and/or the audio tracks? Why? What point do you think the director is trying to make in this sequence?

Figure 3: *An Inconvenient Truth*

Visual Track			
Audio Track	**Gore**: "While I strongly disagree with the Court's decision...I accept it. I accept the finality of it." **Gore**: "Well, that was a hard blow...But what do you do? You make the best of it."		

Iraq in Fragments
(directed by James Longley, 2006)
Chapter 1: 0-0:04:20

This clip comes from the very beginning of this powerful and beautifully shot film about the three geographical, political, and cultural regions in Iraq after the U.S. invasion. We first see slow motion shots of a city, Baghdad before the invasion, as we learn later; people are moving around, doing typical activities of commuting and shopping with blue sky and a river in the background. Then we see a close-up of a young boy's face and eyes; the editing makes it seem as if he is looking out at the city. Suddenly, the images and the sound changes. The streets are now deserted and smoke plumes appear throughout the city, including the bridge we had seen earlier. The pace of the shots and the music is quick; the effect is dizzying and disorienting. We see the same boy's face again, but this time he is bookended with pictures of helicopters and other images of war.

Questions to consider:

1. This is the very beginning of the film. What do you think the rest of the film will be about? Why? What role does the editing play in your prediction?
2. Even though this scene contains no dialogue, how does the director communicate his point to the audience?
3. Review the clip a second time and pay close attention to the before and after the invasions sections. What do you notice about the visual and the audio tracks of each? Why did the director construct the scene in this manner?
4. In what ways does this clip compare to the other clip(s) about Iraq? Does it present similar or different messages about the war? How so?

Fahrenheit 911 (Michael Moore, 2004)
Chapter 20: 1:20:03-1:22:05
Note: Be careful of using this section with younger students; it contains graphic images.

At the beginning of this section, then-President Bush says of the Iraq war that the United States and our allies have prevailed. But, then the director cuts right from Bush's words to a violent explosion in Iraq right in front of a pair of soldiers; on the soundtrack for a few seconds is an unearthly silence and then a series of shots of wounded American soldiers and the sound of screaming and chaotic orders. From this, the director cuts back to another press conference where President Bush delivers the infamous line, "Bring 'em on" at which point the film moves to the horrific images of the American contract workers in Fallujah who were tortured, burned, and hanged.

Questions to consider:

1. This section appears to be critical of President Bush. How does the editing reveal this? What is purpose of putting President Bush in between the images from the war?
2. How do the music and other sound elements in this scene reveal the point the filmmaker is trying to make?
3. If this film were going to praise President Bush, how would it have been edited differently? What would have been left out and what would have been added? Why?
4. How does this sequence compare to the previous clip(s) you have seen about the Iraq war?

Another interesting, and no less troubling topic to explore in this manner is Hurricane Katrina. As with Iraq, there are a number of films that present opportunities for students to analyze this topic from different perspectives, including *Trouble the Water, When the Levees Broke, Axe in the Attic, Dark Water Rising*, and many others.

Step Four:

A final way that I like to have students analyze the power and role that editing plays in shaping our perceptions of a subject is to have students examine political advertising. These are valuable texts for analysis because they are short, which allows for repeated viewings, and they always have a clearly identifiable message. This always used to be a very difficult exercise to do since it could normally only be done during the political season and it meant that I had to spend hours poised over my VCR ready to press "Record" at the first sign of a political ad; but no longer: YouTube and other video streaming outlets have made this a breeze. Using the candidates' own websites or the candidates' channels on YouTube, you can view any number of ads. In addition to having students examine the visual and audio tracks as they had done with the previous exercises in this section, political advertisements generally also include an extensive text track, which as you may recall from above, refers to any printed or graphic information that we read as we watch a documentary. This often

means subtitles, identifications, or even printed campaign slogans. When I do this activity with students, I like to show them two or three different ads that have different purposes; some, for instance, might be about a single issue in the campaign, others might be attack ads of the opposing candidate, while still others are positive ads designed to promote the candidate through some biographical aspect or legislative achievement. It is always more effective if you can use advertisements from opposing candidates in the same election campaign, as in the examples of John McCain and Barak Obama ads in Fig. 4.

Questions to consider for each political advertisement:

1. What is this advertisement's point of view? How do the visual, audio and text tracks communicate this?
2. How does the editing of the visual and the sound tracks support the ad's message?
3. How successful is it at communicating its message? Why?
4. Who is its audience? How do you know based upon the chosen visual, audio, and text tracks?

Figure 4: Analyzing political advertisements

McCain "attack" ad

Obama "attack" ad

McCain "positive" ad

Obama "positive" ad

Reflection:

By learning to analyze the editing choices made in documentary film and in political advertisements, students develop skills that will lead them toward another aspect of NAMLE's Core Principles: to be more "informed, reflective and engaged participants essential for a democratic society." After completing these activities, I had one student say, "I always knew that politicians lied, but I didn't know HOW they lied." I'm not sure if this is exactly what our Founding Fathers had in mind, but I'll take it as a positive sign of recognizing the elements of persuasion that exist throughout our society.

Part Three: Applying Editing Choices

Step One/Introduction:

Based on media literacy principles and effective pedagogy, we cannot leave students only at the analysis level when working with media literacy: we have to take them to the production stage. It is only when students take up the tools of the media that they fully understand their purposes and their power. What follows is a description of a culmination project that I often do with my students after we have spent a significant amount of time examining the role of editing. I ask students to create a 1-2 minute video project with a visual and audio track that demonstrates a clear tone and theme toward a subject of their choosing. For the visual track, they can use archival still and/or moving pictures that they acquire online at the identified fair-use sites, such as flickr and other sites that support Creative Commons licensing or they can film their own footage. For the audio track, they can use music, sound effects (all legally acquired or ones that meet fair use guidelines), or dialogue; no voice-over is allowed. They can use a text track, but it should assist – not state – their theme and tone.

I walk students through the steps of the assignment that very much follow the kinds of steps we would take in any Language Arts classroom that uses the writing process. First, students brainstorm a list of topics in which they have an interest and about which they have an opinion: the president, war, taxes, chocolate, hunting, rap music, etc. I ask them to narrow that list down to 2-3 and write a paragraph for each about their feelings about those topics. Then, they should choose one from their list and answer the following questions:

- What point do you want to make about your topic? (theme)
- What is an appropriate tone (attitude) that you will take to make your point about the subject?
- What are images that you could easily find or create that would illustrate you theme/tone?

Step Two:

Next, they need to begin gathering images that represent that topic or filming or taking pictures of their own. Be sure that they understand that all selected images need to be legally acquired. Google images does not necessarily mean that they have legal use of the images. As a class, we spend some time looking at the policies of fair-use in media literacy contexts. Be sure to take a look at the vast resources available for this topic on the website of the Media Education Lab, a part of Temple University.

Step Three:

Once they have their images, they should assemble (edit) their images in an order and manner appropriate for their subject and tone. They should add music or other audio that complements or juxtaposes the images to create the point they want to make. The easiest way for students to finalize their projects is to simply drop their images into a PowerPoint and add the music in the "Make Movie" functionality that PowerPoint uses, but a number of your students might have access to iMovie or a similar video editing program. I have also gone the low-tech route here again by having students assemble their pictures on poster board and playing music separately during their presentation.

I assess students how effectively and clearly their theme and tone were presented and how their image choice and arrangement reflects their knowledge of the power and effect of editing.

Step Four:

Because I am a Language Arts teacher, not a video production teacher, I cannot resist using this as an opportunity for even more writing, so after they have presented their projects, I ask them to create a short written pieces that addresses the same topic and with the same tone as their video project. What I'm after is for students to see how the choice of form and genre affects meaning, so I require that they create this writ-

ten piece by using the RAFT strategy (see Fig. 5). They could, for instance, write a letter to an editor, a blog, a diary entry, etc. Then, I ask them to consider the following:

- Which piece best captured your intended tone and theme? Why?
- What changed as you moved the visual into a written piece? Why?
- What was similar and different between the visual and the written pieces?
- How were the editing choices similar in visual and the written texts?
- Who is the audience of each of the products you created? Which one(s) would be more effective for your purposes? Why?

Step Five:

Finally, because I think that students should have an opportunity to create meaningful products that have bearing beyond a classroom grade, I ask them to send one of their products – the visual or the written piece – to an audience that might want – or need – to receive the message contained. Students have sent their products to their parents, principals, elected representatives, companies, and so on. In some cases, students have posted their projects online and many have heard back and received feedback, although sometimes students wish they hadn't! Authentic feedback is not always kind.

Figure 5: RAFT elements

The following is a list of possible RAFT elements. This is not a complete list, but it gives you an idea of the possibilities that you can employ while using RAFT.

Roles and Audiences	**Formats**	**Topics**
Who is the author? To whom is he or she writing?	*What form is the author using?*	*What is the purpose?*
student (various ages)	application	to convince
historian	diary entry	to demand
athlete	invitation	to clarify
celebrity	joke	to explain
lawyer	recommendation	to inform
parent	letter	to protest
poet	newspaper article	to criticize
politician	pamphlet	to emphasize
administrator	petitition	to identify
community member	photograph	to sell
movie star	play	to praise
inanimate object	poem	to warn
character from movie	review	to excuse
animal	wanted poster	to urge

Reflection:

More than anything else, effective media literacy education and Language Arts courses should be places of authentic and meaningful activities. This tone project has always been successful with my students because the topic is their own, the editing choices are their own, and the effects they have on society are also their own.

Conclusion

One of the most dismaying aspects of 21st century literacy, according to University of Texas professor and former NCTE President Randy Bomer, is that even though today's students are living incredibly rich and literate lives through blogging, tweets, texting, and creating and posting videos, they are having to leave those types of literacy experiences behind when they enter the classroom because of the narrowing of the curriculum designed to meet requirements of No Child Left behind and short-sighted district policies of electronic media. The activities described here are intended to both reach students where they are in terms of their own media use, and to help them recognize the ways that media products –through editing – affect their responses. Hopefully soon, our policy makers will catch up to our students and begin to recognize that to be literate in the 21st century it is going to take a new range of skills and the opportunities to design, communicate, edit, create and collaborate on messages that will reach far beyond our classroom walls.

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